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SUBJECT: TURKEY COMPLAINS ABOUT NEIGHBORS' WATER MANAGEMENT

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Classified By: Economic Counselor Dale Eppler

¶1. (C) Summary. On the margins of the 5th World Water Forum in Istanbul March 16-22, Iraqi Environment Minister Abdul Latif Jamal Rashid met with Turkish Environment Minister Eroglu and once again asked Turkey to release more water from the Euphrates for use in Iraq. According to Turkish MFA Department Head for Water Issues Sibel Algan, Turkey is growing weary of constant requests from Iraq to increase water supply without a commensurately serious approach by Iraq (or Syria) to manage the water of the Euphrates and Tigris. Despite this frustration, the GOT is not willing to invite a third party to conduct a hydrological study of the basin which it desperately wants because it fears bias in the results. Turkey's new buzz word for managing the water basin is "maximizing the benefit of the water," which in essence means Syria and Iraq should stop growing food and instead buy it from world markets. The MFA would not give exact figures of how much water would be withheld from Iraq once they begin to fill Ilusu dam but did acknowledge the problem. End summary.

Turkey wants "an integrated water basin"

¶2. (C) According to MFA Department Head for Water Issues Sibel Algan, the water of the Tigris and the Euphrates should be considered a single water basin. For Turkey, the ideal next step would be a comprehensive hydrological study of available resources of both rivers. This would include charting water levels over time, calculating the effect of global warming and predicting future water levels. The MFA complained that neither Iraq nor Syria are interested in Turkey's proposal. Econoff suggested that a neutral party with experience in such studies could help build trust among the parties. MFA immediately dismissed this suggestion. Issues of water usage should only be discussed between riparian states. When pressed about the possible advantages of a neutral arbitrator, Algan replied dryly, "there are no neutral parties when it comes to water."

¶3. (C) For Turkey, such a study is important because it would provide a scientific baseline to the trilateral commission (Turkey-Iraq-Syria) in making decisions on the planned usage for the water basin in all three countries. How would such a study enhance the work of the existing trilateral water commission? Algan said the Turks are frustrated with the current commission process and they do not see any progress from trilateral meetings. Algan claimed that Iraq and Syria rarely share plans to develop projects on the two rivers. She finds it ironic that Iraq (and Syria) continually criticize Turkey's construction of dams but that the water stored in those dams provides the only means for sending more water to Iraq, a goal Iraq constantly pushes in the trilateral meetings.

¶4. (C) When asked to share the results of the February 2009 technical meeting of the trilateral commission, Algan said there was nothing to share as no decisions had been made. She thought a ministerial level meeting could be held in the summer or fall of 2009 but she didn't know any specific dates.

"Maximize the Benefits of the Water"

¶5. (C) Harkening back to economic theories on comparative advantage, Algan insisted that Iraq and Syria consider the disproportionately high costs of irrigating the "desert land" of those two countries. She insisted it takes twice as much water to grow crops in Iraq than in Turkey and that the three countries should make decisions on water usage on the principle of "maximizing the benefit of the water" rather than with regard to national boundaries. In essence, Algan suggested that Syria and Iraq should give up irrigation plans, and buy food from Turkey or on the international market, rather than grow it in water-intensive agriculture.

Complaints about Ilusu Dam

¶6. (C) Econoff raised complaints communicated via Embassy Baghdad that filling Ilusu dam would substantially reduce downstream water flows. Algan said it will take two years to fill the reservoir of the dam. Turkey is aware that filling the dam will reduce downstream water flows and is doing its best to minimize disruption. There is a specific schedule to fill the reservoir which has been distributed to Iraq and

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Syria (but she declined to share it with us). Algan noted that 52% of the water of the Tigris comes from Iraq, therefore Iraq can increase its water supply through better management of the water in its territory. (Note: The international consortium financing a large part of the Ilusu dam construction has raised several concerns regarding the environmental impact of the project. As long as these issues remain outstanding, the project will not go forward. End note.)

¶7. (C) Comment: Without directly saying so, the MFA hinted the goal of the hydrological study of the Euphrates/Tigris water basin is to validate their outlook and usage of the water which could be the exact reason Iraq and Syria are less keen to do it. The Turks' fear of including neutral parties probably means the study will not be forthcoming any time soon. Without an objective basis for the decision-making of the trilateral commission, discussions on water sharing between Turkey, Iraq and Syria will likely continue without many results. End comment.

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